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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the importance of intellectual freedom for libraries, librarians, and library associations. Examples of attempts at censorship in Australia are presented, including the Broadcasting Services Amendment (Online Services) Act, 1999, legislation that requires filtering of Internet content. The IFLA (International Federation of Library Associations) statement on intellectual freedom is summarized, and the role of library associations in pursuing the ideal of free access to information and freedom of expression is addressed. (MES)

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Paper

At the end of this century, we reflect on the tremendous developments we have seen. We think of the great women and men who have achieved so much: of Marie Curie and Albert Einstein, of Gandhi and Mandela, of Yuri Gagarin and Amy Johnson, of Nansen and Tensing Norgay, and many more. We think of the great technical innovations and the political and economic gains, of which the establishment of the United Nations and the process of decolonisation must rank most highly.

All of these achievements, and many others, were based on information. It is the mastery of information transmission and use which has fuelled this century.

A century ago, in 1899, a war began in southern Africa which gave us a foretaste of what was to come this century. It had many prophetic characteristics but here we are concerned with those relating to information. For the first time, we had a media conditioned war with graphic, detailed and extremely rapid reporting via mass market newspapers, portable photography, the telegraph and the newly invented moving pictures (first seen four years before in 1895). More than 20,000 people died in the British concentration camps, which were modeled on those first employed in 1895 by the Americans in Cuba, and which foreshadowed the horrors seen under Nazism and elsewhere, including notably in this region, Cambodia under the dictator Pol Pot. General Roberts and Field Marshall Kitchener realised they had to control the flow of information and imposed censorship. The Boers produced masses of atrocity propaganda to sway public opinion. The British produced propaganda films about the Boers. In a nutshell, what we have seen this century, right up to this last year of the century.

What has this to do with libraries, librarians and library associations?

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Well, we are in the information business, of course. We gather, organise and deliver the information the peoples of the world need for their health, wealth and pleasure. It was a library that preserved and transmitted the monk Gregor Mendel's paper on the inherited transmission of plant characteristics, which was a foundation for the science of genetics which appears likely to transform the next century. It is the international network of libraries, databases, etc which enables doctors across the world to seek to understand and deal with AIDS, muscular dystrophy and Alzheimer's. We deliver highly technical information but also the resources which educate and entertain the children of the world. The flow of information is our business.

Through IFLA's Sections, Divisions, Round Tables and Core Programmes we have attempted obtain information access for all. Programmes such as Universal Availability of Publications (UAP) have many proud achievements which have helped all gain access to published information. Effective acquisition, cataloguing, interlending, etc are all essential and we take professional pride in continually raising our standards of service.

Nevertheless, we have come to see that while initiatives to improve such services are essential, there is another dimension which the international library community needs to address. It is the dimension of principle. We must stand for the principle that every individual and all the peoples of the world have the right to access the information needed to live and prosper and the inseparable right to express their ideas and opinions. This intellectual freedom encompasses the essential principles of freedom of thought, freedom of inquiry and freedom of expression. Its spirit is caught in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

> *Everyone has the right to freedom of expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.*

In this context, we should appropriately capitalise it as "Intellectual Freedom", 'IF' not 'if', a definite statement, not a conditional. Intellectual Freedom provides a principled basis for our professional practice as librarians, as we develop collections (physical or digital), provide access and delivery services, and offer support and information. It is no less important in guiding the administration of our libraries, in the policies and procedures we invoke, in our interaction with staff members and clients.

An Australian example

To focus our consideration, I will tell a brief story from my recent professional experience. I am responsible for a university library in Australia, a liberal democratic nation in which libraries seldom experience any difficulties.

We were consequently shocked to hear of the Mapplethorpe case which arose in Britain last year. A student at the University of Central England, in Birmingham, took photographs of illustrations in a book on the eminent photographer Mapplethorpe. She dropped the film off for developing at a pharmacy. The shopkeeper decided the photographs were obscene, informed the police, who demanded the book from the University and subsequently laid an information with the Office of Criminal Prosecutions. We thought it could not happen in Australia. Could it?

While an Australian university library has not been similarly raided, the first few months of 1999 have seen a new impetus to censorship in Australia. Some Federal parliamentarians called for the banning of the new film version of *Lolita*, already restricted to adults by the Office of Film and Literature Classification. There were public demands for the Victoria Police to close down David Hare's play on Oscar Wilde, *The Judas Kiss*, while it was showing in Melbourne and the New South Wales Police to close an exhibition of photographs in Sydney. They followed such recent controversies as the exhibition of Serrano's *Piss Christ* (which outraged clerics), the *Rabelais* student newspaper article on shoplifting (which has been classified RC - Refused Classification), and Ian David's *Blue Murder* (a television

account of police corruption in NSW which has yet to be broadcast in that state). Is this just the healthy tension of a democracy seeking balance or are we seeing a deliberate move to censorship?

Those examples probably just reflect the concerns of a few conservatives. But, unfortunately, one ultra conservative member of Parliament, Senator Brian Harradine, used his position to get our Federal Government to introduce Internet censorship. The ***Broadcasting Services Amendment (Online Services) Act 1999*** introduces a censorship regime which will place the onus on the delivery channel, including Internet service providers and content providers. In pandering to ultra conservative elements in the Senate, the Minister and his Government have placed Australia's democracy at risk. They propose to erect barriers at our intellectual frontiers, filtering what Australians may see.

The Internet undoubtedly provides access to much that many of us may find offensive, but the crude 'nanny' systems and the obtuse tools of the censor interpose a protective authority which presumes to override our judgement of what we may view, read and say. Tendentious media comments feed such concerns, implying that our community is populated by impressionable innocents who will do terrible acts under the malign influence of the Internet - as in the suggestion that Internet use by the perpetrators may explain April's horrifying Columbine school massacre in the USA. However, millions of children play computer games like *Doom*, listen to Marilyn Manson, watch *South Park* and other violent television and film, and access the Internet "without breaking the law, much less committing murder"[1]. The availability of guns in the USA might better explain such events than the effects of violence on the media. Marilyn Manson himself noted sadly that:

> *This tragedy was a product of ignorance, hatred and an access to guns. I hope the media's irresponsible fingerpointing doesn't create more discrimination against kids who look different.*[2]

The proposed tools have been demonstrated to be ineffective:

> *Packet level blocking is too indiscriminate, and its use would create unintended 'holes' all over the emerging global digital infrastructure...*
>
> *Application level blocking is technically possible, but it can easily be circumvented by users in more ways than can packet level blocking. Mandating its use may result in black lists becoming 'hot property', with the result that the black-listed sites may actually become more popular than if they were not black listed at all.*
>
> *... Content blocking implemented purely by technological means will be ineffective, and neither of the above approaches should be mandated. Any technology-based solution can be worked around - purely as a result of the sheer pace of technology change on the Internet.*[3]

The Australian Library and Information Association joined the campaign against the legislation but it was passed despite its technical and moral inadequacies. We must now fight for its repeal.

Such laws strike at our right to know, our rights to freely access information and to openly express our views. They strike at the heart of librarianship, subverting the responsibility of libraries and information services to provide clients with the information they need, and to present all views without bias and in a balanced manner.

The IFLA statement

The IFLA Statement, approved by the Executive Board on 25 March 1999, begins, of course, by locating intellectual freedom as a fundamental human right which was articulated fifty years ago in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which most nations have ratified. This fundamental right has two aspects, the *right to know* and *freedom of expression*, both of which the library and information profession must promote and defend.

In libraries, the defence of intellectual freedom is expressed through the unabashed provision of all the resources needed by our clients. But it needs to go further, as active support for freedom of expression. Our libraries should resound with many contending views, including the unacceptable, and indeed that which we might find hateful. In developing our collections, physical and virtual, we must keep this principle to the fore, actively making available controversial and contentious materials. These might, for example, include the works and Internet sites of the Holocaust deniers, as well as the many scholarly and personal testimonies of the Holocaust. In science, they might include the polemical works of 'creation science' as well as taxonomic studies. In making such materials available, even those that we may find repugnant or just nonsensical, we are not endorsing their arguments, but upholding the essential principle of intellectual freedom. We are endeavouring to "make available the widest variety of materials, reflecting the plurality and diversity of society" and to "ensure that the selection and availability of library materials and services is governed by professional considerations and not by political, moral and religious views".

In promoting the principle's dual aspects of the right to know and freedom of expression, we need to recognize the privacy of library clients, to ensure that their interests do not become the subject of speculation or gossip. It is not for us to feed the controversies or to hold our clients up to questioning or ridicule. Our role is to ensure that our clients can access the information required to pursue their interests and to ensure that the diversity of views and opinion are accessible. From the perspective of professional ethics, we need to ensure that we place the client's interests first. This extends further, to ensuring that all clients have access to the information they need.

In noting that "Libraries provide essential support for lifelong learning, independent decision-making and cultural development for both individuals and groups", the IFLA Statement has particular relevance for libraries. It reminds us that we are not only supporting immediate needs, but also the broader intellectual growth of our clients. It challenges us to feed that growth by providing rich intellectual soil in our libraries.

These challenges lie within our normal professional practice and sit comfortably within the responsibilities of our libraries. But the IFLA Statement goes further, enjoining us to note that "Libraries contribute to the development and maintenance of intellectual freedom and help to safeguard basic democratic values and universal civil rights" and that "Libraries shall acquire, organize and disseminate freely and oppose any form of censorship". Those points urge us to resist censorship beyond our own libraries, in the national interest. In the current climate, they encourage us, not only to ensure intellectual freedom in our own libraries, but also to speak out against attempts to limit intellectual freedom in the wider community, as in the initiatives to censor Internet access.

All of us who work in libraries should join the fight to preserve intellectual freedom. The IFLA Statement is a good place to start. Let's display it in our libraries, promote it to our clients and communities, stand up for the rights both to access information and to express our views, and oppose censorship, on the Internet and elsewhere.

The role of library associations

Library associations have a particular importance in furthering this work as they encourage, support and defend libraries and librarians to take a stand on principle. Library associations have the resources to print and distribute publicity materials, to lobby governments and to prepare and give evidence to inquiries. They can provide a focus for activity and a name under

which arguments can be presented. They can develop alliances with other organisations, including libraries, but extending out to other professional, technical and human rights bodies.

The long standing and excellent work of the Office for Intellectual Freedom of the American Library Association is the outstanding example of the role which library associations can play. Their work is demonstrated in their reports, newsletter, publicity materials and books. But it is most vitally shown in the courage they give individual librarians to stand on principle. The Office's work has demonstrated that attempts to ban books and other media are commonplace in the 'Land of the Free'. For example, among the books censored in public and school libraries in the USA in 1996 were Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, Alex Comfort's *The Joy of Sex*, John Grisham's *The Client*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, AM Homes's *Jack* and Kevin O'Malley's *Froggy Went A-Courtin'*. The most common reason was "conflicts with the values of the community", which is an excuse for narrow mindedness and a threat to minority views.[4]

Some people in this room may not wish to read some of these books. Some may feel that they conflict with their religious or social beliefs. Some may even find them offensive. But that is not the point: "Everyone has the right to freedom of expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers." It is not our place to judge the interests of our readers but rather to locate and make available information without fear or favour.

This is easy to say for those of us who live in a country in which we can express our views without fear of retribution. It is much more difficult to say when one's organisation, job, family or life can be threatened. It takes great courage to stand up to such threats. Few of us have the courage of Aung San Suu Kyi to stand alone against tyranny. But together we can make a stand. Our library associations can provide the shared support to help us make a stand. Through solidarity they can help us take the hard decisions, adopt the unpopular positions. Through international networking with other associations and with IFLA's FAIFE Committee and Office, they can marshal resources which enable us to counter restrictions on the rights to know and to say.

Just as in other professions, we have an ethical responsibility. Our responsibility is to do good for society by facilitating the free flow of ideas. We don't endorse them, we make them available so that our communities and each individual in them can live in an enlightened world. Our library associations articulate that ethical dimension, help us understand it and help project it to the wider communities. Many a librarian has felt stronger and been treated with more respect by being able to refer to a library association's code of ethics, statement on freedom to read or similar document.

Some might argue that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and Article 19 in particular, is a Western, Judeo-Christian, construct which is of little relevance to communities with other beliefs, other ideologies. For example, the Prime Minister of Malaysia, Dr Mahathir Mohamad, in his visionary pursuit of the potential of information technology and the Internet to enrich the lives of Malaysians, has noted that:

> *Before we adopt the Internet culture as the standard culture for the world, we should know the possible contents of that culture, and how to deal with them or influence them in a practical way. The Information Age should result in a world civilisation greater than any civilisation we have known in the past. But ... [in] the face of the information onslaught, we should adopt a proactive approach to counter-balance Western dominance of cyber space. Being digital, IT literate and technologically advanced does not mean that our Asian values are irrelevant. If anything, they will be even more relevant for our men and women as they search for their own niche and identities in a borderless environment.*[5]

The concept of a consistent set of 'Asian values' is a doubtful proposition when we consider

the diversity of 'Asian' cultures across Buddhist Myanmar, Hindu Bali, Islamic Brunei and secular Singapore in Southeast Asia alone. However, while the existence of 'Asian values' might be questioned, it must be recognised that the apparent dominion of the current 'American age' does not mean that American values are universal, let alone eternal. Western societies place extremely high value on individual autonomy while other societies place greater stress on community and social cohesion. Dr Mahathir may be quite correct in suggesting that "our Asian values ... will be even more relevant for our men and women as they search for their own niche and identities in a borderless environment" but that does not justify the suppression of individual liberty, the abrogation of human rights.

The human rights expressed in the Universal Declaration are fundamental. They provide a foundation for individual liberty. Their expression may differ from country to country, society to society. In some, they may be more brashly, more stridently, displayed; in others, they will be more subtly expressed within a community bound by strong religious or cultural ties. Nevertheless they are universal in asserting the right of the individual to be respected and to be able to choose how to live his or her life.

For libraries, this means that we must be able to provide all people with access to the information they want because access to and transmission of information are essential cornerstones of human rights. For library associations, it means that we must band together and work with the IFLA FAIFE Committee and Office to support our members and colleagues as they pursue the ideal of free access to information and freedom of expression.

Endnotes:

1. C Stewart 'Satan or scapegoat' The Weekend Australian 24-25 April 1999 pp 19 and 24

2. 'Worth quoting' The Australian 30 April 1999

3. P McCrea, B Smart and M Andrews "Blocking content on the Internet: a technical perspective' CSIRO Mathematical and Information Sciences June 1998 http://www.tdce.com.au/~terry/reports/blocking/ .

4. Robert P Doyle (1997), Books Challenged or Banned 1997, Chicago, American Library Association. Also available at http://www.ala.org/bbooks .

5. Mahathir Mohamad (1998), Excepts from the speeches of Mahathir Mohamad on the Multimedia Super Corridor, Subang, Malaysia, Pelanduk Publications, p86-87.

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